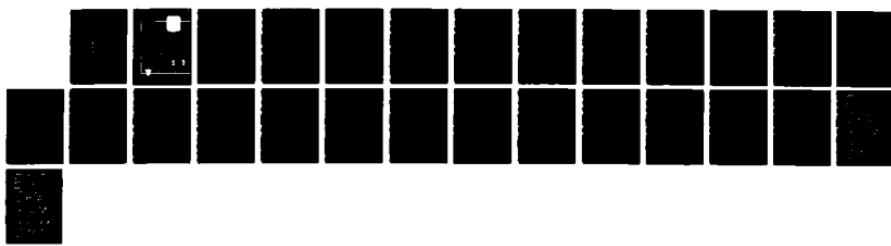


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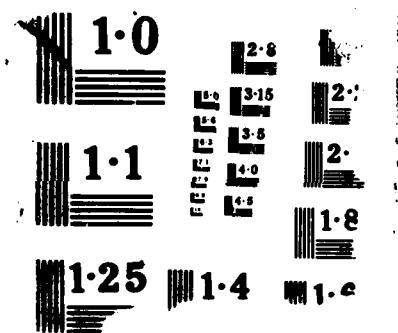
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A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD FOE--  
THE SOVIET OFFICER

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL RONALD G. RICHARD

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM
1. REPORT NUMBER	2. GOVT ACCESSION NO.	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER
4. TITLE (and Subtitle) A New Look at an Old Foe--The Soviet Officer		5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED Individual
		6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER
7. AUTHOR(s) LTC Ronald G. Richard		8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s)
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS U.S. Army War College Carlisle Bks, PA 17013-5050		10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS		12. REPORT DATE 1 Apr 88
		13. NUMBER OF PAGES 22
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS(if different from Controlling Office)		15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report) Uncclas
		15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE
16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report)  DISTRIBUTION A:Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.		
17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)		
18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)		
20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) The Soviet officer has been portrayed as inflexible and very rigid in executing tactical operations. For many years we have been told his inflexibility was our (the Western allies) greatest asset. This assumes that U.S. officers practice innovative tactical procedures as well as boldness of action on the battlefield in order to take instant advantage of the Soviets predictable ways. There are a considerable number of U.S. Marine officers who question the accuracy of the previous two statements. This study contends		

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that the senior Soviet officer at the operational level of war (corps, front, and army level) will be extremely flexible and will take risks in the form of bold actions in order to secure military objectives. Based on this review, U.S. military officers must reexamine Soviet doctrine at the operational level of war.

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

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A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD FOE--THE SOVIET OFFICER

An Individual Study Project  
Intended for Publication

by

Lieutenant Colonel Ronald G. Richard

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U.S. Army War College  
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 177013  
1 April 1988

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## ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Ronald G. Richard, LtCol, USMC

TITLE: A New Look At An Old Foe--The Soviet Officer

FORMAT: Individual Study Intended For Publication

DATE: 1 April 1988 PAGES: 18 CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

The Soviet officer has been portrayed as inflexible and very rigid in executing tactical operations. For many years we have been told his inflexibility was our (the Western allies) greatest asset. This assumes that U.S. officers practice innovative tactical procedures as well as boldness of action on the battlefield in order to take instant advantage of the Soviets predictable ways. There are a considerable number of U.S. Marine officers who question the accuracy of the previous two statements. This study contends that the senior Soviet officer at the operational level of war (corps, front, and army level) will be extremely flexible and will take risks in the form of bold actions in order to secure military objectives. Based on this review, U.S. military officers must reexamine Soviet doctrine at the operational level of war.



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## Introduction

The Soviet armed forces play a major role in most of U.S. war games and map exercises. During these evaluations, much effort is devoted to anticipating Soviet tactics while not establishing patterns in our own tactical operations. In most instances, the Soviet soldier is depicted as rigid and inflexible in matters concerning tactical changes and is generally thought to have considerably less initiative than his American counterpart.

For 20 years we have been told one of our greatest advantages over that enemy was his inability to change his plan quickly and take advantage of a particular tactical situation; conversely, this lack of flexibility is presumed to be one of our greatest assets. But perhaps that is not true to the degree that some among us would suggest. After participating and observing several war games, I came to suspect that perhaps our tactics and operational intent may be predictable. During these exercises, the Soviet commander is given little credit for any type of innovative tactical scheme and no opportunity to employ his units to cause anything other than what was expected.

After a few months as a student at the Army War College, I began to wonder what my Soviet counterpart was studying about me, the Marine Corps, and the entire U.S. Armed Forces. The thought that he was able to predict U.S. tactical moves and view us as predictable is not at all comforting.

This article will examine the Soviet officer corps in general and the senior officer specifically. I do not pretend to be able to analyze or discover exactly what decisions he may make on the field of battle, but I would like to examine his schooling and professional experiences in order to determine what type of officer he is now and his professional trends for the future. The main reason for taking this approach is an attempt to ascertain his willingness for risk taking and boldness of action. This type of assessment goes beyond knowing your enemy, it should be the essence of our own evaluation of the adequacy of present U.S. operational doctrine and tactics.

#### **MILITARY SCHOOLING**

Soviet officers are currently obtained through one of three separate channels: the officer commissioning school system, reserve officers called to active duty, and direct commissions of nonofficer personnel.<sup>1</sup> The most important of these sources is the commissioning school system, a network of approximately 140 schools similar to, but much more specialized than, the U.S. service academies.<sup>2</sup>

Acceptance by an officer commissioning school begins a exhaustive 4 to 5 year educational program. This is where basic officership, tactics, and other associated skills are taught. Depending on how successful an officer has been at approximately 8 years of commissioned service, he then goes to one of two advanced officer educational programs. Those who are

judged to be general officer caliber attend a military academy organized by service and branch, while others are enrolled in an advanced course with emphasis on battalion and regimental duties and responsibilities.

The military academies constitute the most important phase of an officer's career. Attendance in one of these academies allows advancement in both staff and command assignments. A Soviet officer must have a superb record and less than 33 years of age in order to attend. This type of schooling is roughly equivalent to our intermediate level military schools. A striking difference is that the Soviet officer spends 3 to 5 years attending his "Command and Staff College," with much of his time devoted to practical application.<sup>3</sup> Attendance at a branch academy will accelerate promotion and is a prerequisite for battalion and regimental command.

The Voroshilov Academy is the Soviet equivalent of our top level school, e.g. Army War College, Naval War College, etc. This academy trains senior officers for divisional and higher command and staff positions. The academy consists of two programs: a 2 year course and special short courses. Officers attending the Voroshilov Academy must have graduated from a military academy, have had at least two years experience as a staff officer, and hold the rank of Colonel to Major General. The special short courses are for general officers. They are a general update of military subjects, while the 2 year program is for the senior field grade officers who will fill top level assignments upon graduation.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the professional schools, all officers are required to continue their political education. This aspect of an officer's schooling has not been addressed. It is safe to say that virtually all senior officers are members of the Communist Party. Evening studies in Marxism-Leninism are organized at all military garrisons. Officers must demonstrate their political reliability as well as learn more about Communist ideology in order to be promoted and attend the required academies. A closer look at Soviet society indicates that access to special benefits become easier if an individual belongs to a club or group that is supported and organized by the Communist Party, such as the Pioneer Clubs.<sup>5</sup> As the Soviet officer moves through the ranks, further instruction in politics seems normal and is part of being successful in the Soviet military. The Communist Party controls all aspects of Soviet society to include the military; therefore, we should fully expect a typical officer to be a member of the Communist Party and discount the view that he chose that course after due consideration.

In summary, the high quality Soviet senior officer after about twenty-three years of service will have had approximately 9 to 10 years of military schooling. This includes an equivalent college education. A typical U.S. officer that has graduated from a service academy has between 6 to 7 years of formal military schooling after twenty-three years of active service, or about 3 years of schooling if not a graduate of a service academy.

Should we be alarmed about this disproportionate amount of military schooling between the Soviet and U.S. officer? I think

not. Soviet military education is very specific in nature and emphasizes a "scientific" approach to war fighting. For example, much time is devoted to precise calculations as to the number of artillery rounds needed for preparatory fires relative to enemy strength and disposition. All other combat multipliers are computed by hand and discussed in detail. After twenty plus years of service the Soviet officer is expertly trained in the precise tools of his trade. Up to this point, he has not had the opportunity nor the inclination to be innovative or depart from the time-tested, systematic way of waging war by use of "norms." This will change in a dramatic way as that same officer finds himself in command of an Army or an Army Front.

#### **The Soviet Officer Corps**

A high ranking Soviet officer, who defected to the West, has many interesting observations about the Soviet officer corps. His general observations about the officer corps are as follows:

"It is designed to take maximum advantage of the rivalry between the officers on each rung of the promotion ladder and to ensure that advancement comes as quickly as possible to the staunchest supporters of the regime--the hardest, most callous, most masterful and most competent."

To achieve this, the Soviet system applies the following rules:

1. Seniority depends not on rank but on position. Only when two officers have no professional connection with one another is seniority determined by rank.

2. An officer's eligibility for a higher appointment depends, not on his rank or length of service, but on his ability to command.

3. The time spent in a particular job is not limited in any way. Thus, an officer may command a platoon for the whole of his service or he may be given new responsibilities within a few months.

4. The appointment held by an officer makes him eligible for a particular rank. For example, imagine that the deputy commander of a battalion is killed in action. There are three candidates under consideration: a captain, a senior lieutenant, and a lieutenant who has been in command of a company for two weeks. The battalion commander knows the captain is a heavy drinker, and the senior lieutenant is not liked by the battalion commander. He therefore appoints the lieutenant as his deputy who now is senior to all other officers in the battalion except the commander. Consider what would happen if the battalion commander was killed and the newly appointed lieutenant had to pick a deputy of his own.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the procedures mentioned seem odd and ill-suited for a military organization. That is what we think; the Russian in the Soviet Army expects it. We think and view things completely differently than our Soviet counterpart--that has

been part of the problem. We expect the Soviet officer to think as we do--he doesn't. Most Americans think of the Russian people as Europeans and anticipate many of their actions based on that perception. Many of us in the military do the exact same thing when attempting to forecast Soviet actions. The Soviet officer corps is largely Slavic by ethnic make up. The culture varies considerably from that of Europeans. The Slavs have been dominated through much of their history by foreign powers who exerted strong centralized authority over the Russian people.

There is a school of thought that emphasizes the cultural experiences of the Russians to explain the past, and anticipate future Soviet actions when the set of attitudes and beliefs of the Soviet ruling elite are applied to defense issues.<sup>7</sup> This different technique is referred to as strategic culture. While not debating the value of strategic culture, it most certainly can be used in evaluating the career Soviet officer.

There are approximately 500,000 officers on active duty in the Soviet army today or roughly 16% of the total force.<sup>8</sup> This is a much higher percentage than in Western armies. The reason this situation exists is the lack of a professional noncommissioned officer corps and the tight control over troops that is required by the Soviet system. Many duties associated with those of noncommissioned officers by Western standards are performed by warrant officers in the Soviet army. The warrant officer program was introduced in the early 1970s and is still in its infancy. It was established as a first step in recreating a Soviet NCO corps; however, warrant officers serve in junior command billets as well

as those associated with senior NCO billets. This soldier is neither a NCO or officer, but more of "the officer's assistant." He is most certainly viewed by both the Soviet officer corps and enlisted men far differently than Marine officers view our NCOs and SNCOs. Because of this anomaly, Soviet experts question the quality of leadership at the small unit level.

The Soviet officer is much more inclined to devote most of his time to mastering the technical aspects of his duties rather than becoming involved with his leadership responsibilities. This is a result of his training and the "quantitative/scientific" approach taken in waging war. For this reason, most Soviet officers tend to prefer staff positions over command billets.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike American officers, the Soviet officer tends not to change assignments as often and can remain on active duty until retirement without being forced out due to failure of promotion. In many instances an officer could spend his entire time in the military as a senior or even a junior lieutenant. The mandatory age of retirement varies with rank. A junior lieutenant must retire at age forty. Many officers become experts at their job as a result of lengthy tenure; however, this certainly does not promote innovative change or progressive improvements due to outside influence. This is not the case with the officer who does aspire to higher positions of responsibility. That officer will experience a wide range of assignments.

The Soviets also have an additional requirement for all officers regardless of the individual personal desires of a member. Political reliability is the first order of business for

any officer whether he seeks further advancement or is satisfied with his present rank. Especially for the officer who chooses to advance through the system, this can be an all-consuming requirement. Meeting the needs of the party structure often takes precedence over tending to problems of the troops.<sup>10</sup> While at the same time the system forces compromise on the part of the officer seeking advancement, it has also recently attempted to discourage such actions. The following example taken from the publication Red Star applies:

It tells the cautionary tale of General Turkin and his inspection of an army unit in the Siberian Military District. The commanding officer went to extraordinary and illegal lengths to arrange sumptuous hospitality for the general, amongst other preparations he sent one of his sergeants home to his native Armenia to procure a supply of the finest Armenian brandy. On his arrival at the unit the general was soon asking for more, rare books for instance which could not be obtained in Moscow and, with even greater avarice, an imported Japanese tape recorder. It is not recorded how, but the commanding officer managed to find these precious items and the general went away satisfied, presumably having awarded the coveted grading of excellent to the unit. Paying for these solicited gifts was not nearly so easy as obtaining them. It seems that the funds had to be borrowed from the money the unit had received for seasonal labor, in other words for work on the harvest or other civilian sector projects. Somehow during

the accountancy the story came out. The general was as a result dismissed from the Army and the Party. Commensurate justice was melted out to the commanding officer and the affair was closed.<sup>11</sup>

Although the general was dismissed, it is a curious policy that would allow the commanding officer to remain in the army and in the same command. Could it be that actions such as this are an accepted part of the system but should not be abused to the extent as the example portrayed?

Just as in Western armies, the Soviets too are directed by civilian political leaders. Here the similarities end. The politicians that control the military are first and foremost heads of the Communist Party. The military's role, especially the officer corps, is to insure the security of the homeland as well as the Communist Party. The fact that a unit's political officer is part of a military officer's evaluation chain of command should not go unnoticed. Additionally, the KGB uses spies within all ranks to constantly monitor the actions of enlisted and officers alike.<sup>12</sup>

Because of these practices of the Communist Party, officers are reluctant to display any actions that could be interpreted as disloyal. An easy method to insure actions are not viewed the wrong way is to follow bureaucratic guidelines to the letter. That is more easily done when assigned to a staff or bureaucratic position. Therefore, the stress placed on technical qualifications minimizes reliance on judgmental decisions, which

are mutually agreeable to a totalitarian regime as well as the individual officer.

Those of us in the West who study the Soviet Army should not confuse these findings with the idea that the Soviet officer is not a professional and is not loyal to his government or the Russian homeland. The system in which he operates is the only one he knows; furthermore, being an officer in Soviet society commands prestige and respect. We should guard against evaluating our counterpart solely using Western standards and mindsets. The Soviet officer corps has many ambitious men who rise to the height of their profession well qualified to practice the art of war. Their motives may be different than ours as well as the methods used. The reality of the situation is the fact that the corps of officers in the Soviet Army hold the reins of a powerful force. That force would be difficult to defeat if preconceived notions of the adversary were either wrong or implied a lack of flexibility at all levels of command.

#### **The Senior Soviet Officer**

Command selection in the officer corps is based on merit and the ability to precisely execute tactical orders. This type of system would seem to discourage tactical-risk taking for fear that innovative actions might not be viewed favorably by a senior officer. This is especially true for the ranks of lieutenant through colonel, because all appointments above the regimental commander level are done by the Administrative Department of the

Central Committee. Appointments senior to that of divisional commander must also be ratified by the Politburo. However, the Politburo follows the principle used throughout: seniority is determined not by rank but by the position held, for it was the Politburo itself which devised the principle.<sup>13</sup> It is one thing for Congress to approve the results of a selection board as in our system, but altogether a different matter when a political body, the Central Committee or the Politburo, actually selects senior appointments. A general in the Soviet Army must be politically reliable as well as operationally proficient. A general officer can never be assured of his position if his politics are incorrect or appear to be at odds with the political leaders. If this is the situation during peace time, what would it be like during war time? All we can reasonably do is examine the system by which officers are trained and attempt to anticipate the actions of the commander we oppose during war.

With that in mind, consider the officer who finally is appointed to the general officer ranks in the Soviet Army; he most certainly must feel very successful and fortunate to have attained such a position within the Soviet society. For years he has been part of the party and the system. Now that officer is viewed by himself as well as others as an example of what faithful service to party can provide. This Soviet general officer is indeed fortunate; however, he remains subordinate to the Soviet military system. That type of officer will continue doing what has been successful for him over his career, i.e.

following orders and the procedures as prescribed by tactical doctrine.

Many of us confuse boldness of action as innovative, risk-taking tactical measures. The Soviet tactical procedures at the Front and Army level specifically call for bold tactical action. The doctrine explicitly requires that the commander take advantage of weaknesses in his enemies' rear areas and flanks. Entire units, as large as reinforced divisions, are devoted for such missions. They are called Operational Maneuver Groups (OMG) and should not be confused with reserve forces. The Soviet general, while simply following normal procedures, will appear to be free-wheeling and willing to use his forces in ways other than what could be anticipated. The results are the same for the forces opposing the Soviets, regardless of the motives or tactical abilities of the operational commander.

Because of the way the Soviet commander will conduct himself at that level of conflict, it is imperative we change our views concerning the Soviet Army's flexibility at the operational level. Operations above the division level are generally viewed by both Soviet and Western forces as the operational level of war; division level and below are regarded as tactical. The Soviet officers are very flexible at the operational level because of the way Soviet forces are organized, equipped, and instructed, not because the commander is willing to take some risk or some other bold tactical action. The reasons for such actions make little difference. The successful results of those

actions could be disastrous to an ill-prepared foe or more importantly, a very naive one.

The curriculum at the Soviet General Staff Academy reflects this type of operational flexibility by emphasizing modeling and game theory. The aim of the Academy is to develop in their graduating students the capacity for independent operational thinking, situational analysis, the ability to draw conclusions, make rapid decisions, and press for fulfilling the assigned mission.<sup>14</sup> Nearly 40% of the entire curriculum is devoted to operational decisionmaking and tactics at the operational level.

The following quote is applicable:

"Modeling exercises involve simulation of a combat situation and methods of reaching the goal of victory. A combat scenario will be enacted with one goal, but several paths to the goal are available. The path chosen will depend on conditions of the simulated battle and the resources available. The assumption is that there is one best means to the goal and that the person with initiative will find this means. Game theory is closely related to modeling, and in fact is often referred to as games simulation or games modeling. The principle of games modeling is for the trainee to act as an umpire at each stage of the engagement, comparing the decisions of the opposing sides and determining the potential result of their actions. Competitions are often used in this manner to help facilitate the learning of initiative."<sup>15</sup>

Today the Soviets emphasize the value of the offensive, the importance of surprise and deception, the utility of encirclement operations and exploitation and the conduct of meeting engagements at the corps level. Soviet authors have accorded special attention to operational maneuver performed by mobile groups and tactical maneuver by forward detachments and have investigated in detail virtually every aspect of past mobile operations. Among the myriad of operations the Soviets have

selected for special study have been the Belorussian Operation (June 1944), the Vistula-Oder Operation (January 1945) and the Manchurian Operation (August 1945), all of which they consider relevant to contemporary operations.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, the Soviet system attempts to teach future generals the value of boldness of action; however, how well those officers learn its value and are able to practice those procedures in the field below the operational level (division and below) remains questionable. While the Soviet military attempts to facilitate the individual initiative of soldiers and senior commanders, that same military system, society, and culture inhibits initiative, manifested in the socialization of the Soviets, and their history.

Soviet society inhibits individuals from bringing undue attention to themselves and almost rewards them for keeping a low profile. Displaying initiative is a risk, and if the decision is incorrect, the resulting punishment can be harsh. In peacetime, the rewards for correct decisions as a result of initiative or risk-taking are usually small and in some instances go unnoticed by seniors. At the tactical level, risk is taken when not fulfilling a senior's orders exactly as directed. If for some reason the original plan does not work, the senior can simply state that he too was following orders. That would not be the case if one of his subordinates acted in a way that was contrary to the prescribed order.

In the Soviet system, the situation described above would not apply at the operational level because individual risk would

not be a factor. The Soviet operational art demands boldness of action with the OMGs and requires only tactical-level plans to be executed precisely as issued. It seems the military would like all of its officers to practice initiative but only allows senior officers to do so in the form of operational procedures.

#### **Other Factors**

Recently, the West, and the United States in particular, has seen and heard a different type of Soviet leader in the person of General Secretary Gorbachev. Many noted Soviet observers feel Gorbachev's policies and goals will affect the military with as much change as the rest of Soviet society. There are generally three parts to Gorbachev's restructuring plan: reorganize the decisionmaking process of the Communist Party, change foreign policy priorities, and redefine the security goals of the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup>

The redefinition of security goals can best be stated as moving toward reasonable sufficiency and away from superior numbers. Tied to reasonable sufficiency is the ability to deny the United States a first strike capability while accepting minimal damages. The key change here is accepting minimal damage, rather than not allowing the United States a first strike capability at all. At the same time, the General Secretary would like to create a body of experts other than the military for the development of high strategy and security goals.<sup>18</sup>

This type of thinking would allow a reduction in the size of the armed forces in general. Additionally, if linkage to other strategic agreements were decoupled, this too could allow a reduction of forces. What does all this mean? A smaller Soviet Army would become better at individual leadership skills and would be forced away from relying on numbers alone to be successful at the tactical level. Leadership skills at lower levels of command would certainly be improved upon and emphasized.

No one can predict exactly what type of change will eventually take place but some change has and will continue to occur. College education has doubled while secondary education has tripled in recent years. The head of the Communist Party is the first true college educated leader in Soviet history. The entire population is changing. The military officer corps is slowly being viewed as an extension of the old Imperial army, with traditional values such as duty to the motherland and service to country being emphasized. 19

Many Soviet experts now feel that the arms race has stagnated the Soviet economy to the point of no return unless a reduction of spending on defense is implemented. By the year 2000 the Soviet Union could become a third rate power except in military might if corrective action is not taken in the near future.

All of these actions, if taken, would only be a brief interlude in the quest for Soviet domination over the West; therefore, we should recognize the reasons for change as well as

understand the end results of those actions. A reduction of forces will undoubtedly improve the initiative of the Soviet officer at all levels because he will have to be better than he is today.

At the present time, tactical level warfighting is only a means to an end in accomplishing the operational objective. With that in mind, we should all realize that the senior Soviet officer corps is very flexible at higher levels and is attempting to pass that flexibility down to officers at lower levels. Regardless of the reasons for this boldness of action at the operational level of war, the end results could be devastating to a Soviet adversary if that adversary is lulled into believing outdated rhetoric. Our focus should be on the Soviet officer corps's future capabilities and not on past impressions.

ENDNOTES

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